

# Steel magnolias

*Unconventional women show us how easy it is to turn a page and start anew. And change the rules of engagement and perception. All it needs is a little passion. We pick five trailblazers. By Devi Singh and Rupinder Kaur*

## HORSE WHISPERER

AMEETA MEHRA

[India's only woman stud farm owner]

**PROPELLED** by destiny, she got into

something a lot of women would have little or no interest in.

But that is not the moot point. Admirable is her perseverance and grit to carry on that has taken her to heights which even she didn't envisage. Ameeta Mehra, daughter of PK Mehra, the brainchild behind Usha Stud farms, has created several benchmarks in her long journey.

She entered the arena after she lost her parents in 2001 in a chopper crash. Many people, including her well wishers, thought that she would sell the stud farm as there was no male heir in the family to take care of the same. There were many apprehensions cast upon her capabilities in a male bastion which she overcame eventually.

Challenges were many as equine sports in India is majorly male-dominated with only one per cent of women in the fray. "Running and managing a leading stud farm was quite an anomaly as there were and are only a handful of women who are engaged in this profession. They either have very small establishments or are not a threat to the male domain of the large breeding and racing families that run stud farms, such as Shapoorji Palonji of Manjri Stud farms, Cyrus Poonawala of the Serum Institute of India, Vijay Mallya of Kunigal Stud Farm, not to mention the mega rich high profile owners who buy and own horses," says Mehra.

Even though she began winning several races, including the Derby, breaking records, she realised that she had to be twice as successful as her male counterparts to prove that she really was on top. And it was not just a fluke. "I have bred 13 Indian Derby winners besides breaking a host of other records. Still people are ready to cry hoarse if my results go down a notch one season," she tells us. Even today she gets to hear things like, "Oh her success is due to her manager who happens to be a man, or the stallion her father chose." However 15 years later, after managers have come and gone, stallions are dead and gone, the same people have started admitting that perhaps the merit lies with the woman who is running the farm.

In her own words, "I have broken the glass wall in this industry in more than one way." She consciously maintains



a tough, no nonsense demeanour, which might be an aberration considering the position she holds and the kind of industry she belongs to. Her decision of not socialising and wasting time in networking might stem due to an in-born reserve. She maintains a certain distance from everybody, not for any particular reason, but because she likes being on her own. She is definitely a spiritual person who seeks and enjoys her personal self and space. She devotes her leisure time composing music on piano, playing tennis, going for walks in the oak forests in the Himalayas, meditating, playing with her beloved dog Monk and spending time with her horses.

“Strangely, now no one expects me to show up anywhere. After a time, people realise, accept and respect you for the way you are but I can assure you the struggle would have been far easier had I been a man,” she admits.

Having said that she would not change being a woman for anything in the world, saying, “I believe

my life can serve as an inspiration for other women and give them the belief that it doesn't matter who you are, man or woman, married or single. What matters is your undiluted focus on excellence and striving for perfection in whatever you do.” Certainly she has broken ground in a male-dominated profession, proved her competitors and rivals wrong, preferred to remain single, all of which is a manifestation of what all a woman is capable of doing only if she wants to.

Her love for horses was intrinsic and not simply instilled in her. Growing up as a three-year-old, she had a Shetland pony as a pet in the family backyard. Despite all her passion for horses, she wanted to do nothing with her father's stud farm when she grew up. Instead she went to volunteer at Mirambika, Sri Aurobindo Ashram. But then she eventually returned home and decided to join her father in her late twenties. “My father systematically gave his knowledge to me. In fact, he had a quick temper and no patience to



teach anyone. But he told me that he was going to make an exception and teach me what he knew," she reminisces.

Having done an equine management course at the premier Irish National Stud with a gold medal for the best project on "How to select a stallion", her educational credentials did come in handy when the onus of handling the farm eventually fell on her.

Maybe it was his belief in her that catapulted her to these heights. "My father would often say to me that he has never met someone so strong which was really big as it was coming from one of the strongest and charismatic men I knew and know of," she adds.

The one important technique her father taught her about horse-breeding, which she hasn't forgotten even today is, "Nothing fattens a horse more than the master's eye." This means that it's not how much feed and fodder you give to a horse that makes it thrive and excel, but the amount of time, attention and loving care that you give that really helps it develop to its fullest potential.

Breeding of horses is both an art and a science. "The difference between a lot of breeders and top class horse-breeders like Aga Khan is that we create lineages and families that go on from generation to generation to make a big difference

to the breed of thoroughbreds. My aim is to bring a sense of pride in our Indian thoroughbred horse-breeding operations. The Indian racing and breeding industry is still niche, and if the government supports it even by 10 per cent, we can begin to export our Indian thoroughbreds for good prices abroad and compete internationally."

Even during her days as the first woman Stipendiary Steward of Delhi Race Club in 2002, she was both feared and respected for her independent views and ethical stand. "I'm not too bothered or conscious about my gender or the gender of those I am working with. Though I guess for a lot of people who are not used to dealing with a woman, it must be awkward."

On the dearth of women in equine sports in the country, she says, "The entry is based either through a relative or friend and without a relentless pursuit for excellence it is difficult to get to the top. I have to add one thing though, if I had to choose a career it would not be horse-breeding. Destiny has brought it to me and I took it up as a duty towards my parents. However, in my personal experience I have found that the Divine knows better what is best for you and boy I am lucky to have a father who saw no difference between a boy and girl."



## HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

NISHA MADHULIKA

[Online food teacher]

WITH food menus all over reading like passionate poetry and people gradually shifting to more sophisticated palates, Nisha Madhulika, who is in her mid-fifties, has been spreading her love for all things simple and scrumptious since 2007. All it usually takes to be productive in this day and age is a click of a button and, of course, high-speed internet (hands down). Madhulika made the most of it when most women her age would be reluctant to enter the cyber space. Before becoming an internet sensation, she assisted her husband at his office in Delhi but after shifting to Noida, it was difficult for her to manage.

Soon, it all began with a food blog and a website, where Madhulika, now a homemaker, would post recipes and pictures of her home-cooked vegetarian creations, mostly north-Indian, which garnered appreciation from all over. If your taste buds have been craving the *dhaba*-styled bowl of ubiquitous *tadke wali dals* or the sun-kissed *amla* and mango chutneys, a quick tutorial on her channel will enlighten the hidden gourmet in you.

"Cooking is a delightful activity for me. After I started staying at home, I had time after finishing my chores. I would read so many blogs on cooking that I was inspired to start my own. I would be

uploading recipes of those dishes which I would prepare in the morning for my family everyday and soon I had followers from all over the country. My husband recommended that I launch a website. I guess *ghar ka khana* would never lose its charm," she tells us.

After many requests from her followers to upload videos of her creation online, she started a YouTube channel in 2011 and today, has over 4,40,000 subscribers from all across the world and over 135 million views. "I remember my first video was of a vegetable that I had cooked. The quantum of comments and likes gave me a sense of self-worth. We also created a room at our place with a kitchen that is dedicated for shooting videos with the required equipment," Madhulika says. She now has a professional photographer to assist her.

With a plethora of food channels online, Madhulika's quick and hearty lessons stand out because of the sense of relatability that one gets from the simple ingredients and the kitchen utensils she uses in her videos. "There have been comments that make me tear up," she shares. "Boys staying away from their families would tell me how they've nearly perfected the art of cooking what their mothers would make via my videos."

**LOUNGING** by the seaside with your feet dunked in the warm sand or in the near-pristine waters of the ocean while listening to the waves crash is undoubtedly therapeutic. A walk, a run or even a swim would do but ever thought of riding high on the waves with nothing else but a surfboard and cheers to accompany you?

But first, a few surfing lessons would come in handy. Ishita Malaviya, India's first professional woman surfer, is on a mission to educate local fishermen about swimming and others who feel that surfing is a very exclusive and expensive sport. "In India, there is a major fear of the ocean and people are often afraid to venture into the sea. We hear about so many cases of drowning. Surfing can help them in such situations," says Malaviya who co-started the Shaka Surf Club in a small fishing village called Kodi Bengre near Udupi, Karnataka.

The 26-year-old started surfing in 2007 when she moved to Manipal to pursue her studies in journalism. It was then that she met a German exchange student who was accompanying other surfers from

California living in an *ashram* nearby. "He introduced me and my boyfriend Tushar to them and they gave us a few lessons. We had to teach ourselves how to surf. Even YouTube videos helped. For two years, we only had one surfboard for which we almost sold everything we owned. Slowly, it took over our lives because it is was so much fun and enabled us to develop a healthy lifestyle," she shares.

Initially, she and her partner started giving surfing lessons in order to purchase more surfing equipment. "Since then, we've been growing and working very closely with the local community, especially the fishermen and their families. We want the kids of the community to appreciate the resources they have," Malaviya tells us. Apart from kids and mothers, even grandmothers as old as 65 have joined the crew.

Malaviya says that though she was brought up in the city of Mumbai, she can't imagine moving back to the city. "I can't get into a 9-5 job and not be able to surf everyday. It was a major lifestyle decision for me and this is where I always wanted to be," she signs off.

## **SURF'S UP!**

**ISHITA MALAVIYA**

[India's first professional woman surfer]

MING NOMCHONG

## WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE



**KALKI KOECHLIN**

[Actor, playwright]

**SHE** writes what she feels strongly about and then she enunciates each word in a rhythm that echoes within your mind for a long while. Kalki Koechlin is always in search of “truth and meaning” when she takes up a role in a film or a theatre production. She speaks up, she performs and goes viral within minutes of uploading her concerns in a satirical or a grave manner.

Apart from her unconventional film choices (last seen in Shonali Bose’s *Margarita With A Straw* where she plays the role of a girl suffering from cerebral palsy), she recently featured in a documentary film *Freedom Matters* alongside Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi on human trafficking. In the month of January, her lyrical piece *The Printing Machine* made its way to YouTube and within a month garnered over one million views. She imitates the sound of a printing machine churning out sensationalised news on brutalities against women where she speaks of the 2012 Delhi gangrape, the Badaun case, beauty standard norms set by society, rape cases of foreign tourists, Irom Sharmila being force-fed, acid attacks among other grave issues.

“When something affects me, I like writing and debating about it. It is necessary for people to discuss issues openly. Different people would relate to different things and I don’t think one issue is more important than the other. I’m personally attached to certain matters so it comes from there. People often draw some inspiration from the smallest of things. Everything won’t change in one go, there are many small steps that need to be taken,” the 32-year-old actress tells us.

The *Dev D* actress shares how people expect celebrities and actors to be activists but you can’t make an individual stand up for a cause as it “needs to come from within.”

She herself has said no to a number of NGOs since she feels she would’ve been just another “poster girl.”

“You have to get involved properly and understand the cause. It has to be something you feel strongly about and work towards bringing in that change by maybe collaborating with an NGO or in whatever way. It needs to come from the person’s belief and passion for the subject,” Koechlin explains. She has been actively involved with the NGO ADAPT (Able Disable All People Together) and has been highlighting implications due to lack of awareness when it comes to disability. She has also voiced support for the FTII students.